Chasing away the shadows

"Does it hurt to lie?”

Est

By the third night, it had become a routine. Not planned, not agreed on, just… something we slid into.

10:17 AM

My phone buzzes on my desk. I lunge for it like it’s a live grenade.

William: Morning. Did you sleep?

I stare at the screen. Morning. Not “hey” or “hi” or the dreaded “sup.” Just… morning. Like we’re two people who wake up in the same apartment and check in before coffee. My stomach does a slow, traitorous flip.

Me: Barely. You?

William: Same. Kept thinking about the painting.

I exhale. Okay. Safe territory. Art. Not feelings. Not the fact that I dreamed about his laugh last night and woke up with my heart pounding like I’d run a marathon.

Me: Still not done?

William: No. It’s… harder than I thought.

Me: Why?

Three dots appear. Disappear. Reappear. My thumb hovers over the keyboard, ready to backpedal if he ghosts the question. But then—

William: Because I keep wanting it to be perfect. And it won’t be. Not yet.

Something warm unfurls in my chest. I type, delete, retype.

Me: Perfection’s overrated. I like the messy ones.

Send. Immediately regret. Too flirty? Too personal? Too—

William: Yeah. Me too.

My breath catches. Did he just… flirt back? Or was that just agreement about art? I need a flowchart.

William: Call?

And then the line would ring, and we’d talk. For minutes. For hours.

The first time, we'd talked mostly about the shoot: his anxieties, the publisher's demands, my edit choices. The second time, it was about how he kept bumping into coffee tables. By the fifth, we were deep into childhood stories—my first stolen camera, his first painting that made his mother cry. He was different on the phone.

Less brittle. Less sharp-edged. The silences were still there, but they felt more like pauses to breathe than cliffs I might fall off. Sometimes, when he forgot to guard his tone, his voice even went warm. I'd catch myself lying on my back, phone pressed to my ear, staring at the cracks in my ceiling and smiling at nothing like an idiot. Curiosity, I told myself. I was just… fascinated. By the way his brain worked. By how someone so afraid of the world could still see it so clearly. By how much grief one person could carry and still make something beautiful. Just curiosity.

Sure.

One night, around 1:30 a.m., after he'd spent ten full minutes explaining why he hated the word "genius" "It erases the work and excuses the cruelty," he said, like he'd been waiting to say it out loud for years, there was a long, comfortable stretch of silence.

"You're still there?" I asked softly.

"Yes." he said. I could hear the faint buzz of his fridge, the distant hum of the city through his windows. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit." I said.

"Mm." I could almost see the small tilt of his mouth. "You make it worse."

"Me?"

"You ask questions." he said. "And then you listen to the answers. It's… disorienting."

I swallowed around the sudden tightness in my throat. "Is that a complaint?"

"No." A beat. "It's why I keep calling."

The words hit harder than I wanted them to. I stared at the ceiling, heat prickling the back of my neck. We talked until the sky on my side of the city started to pale. At some point, I heard his breathing even out—not quite asleep, but close. We hung up before either of us crossed that line again. After I ended the call, I lay there in the dark, phone still in my hand, heart doing something it hadn't done in a long time: pushing, reaching, wanting.

Curiosity had teeth now.

The messages kept coming during the day, too. Photos, mostly.

I never sent him pictures of myself. He never sent any of himself either. Somehow, that felt too… direct. Too risky. Instead, we traded fragments of our worlds: street corners and patchy paint, coffee mugs and shadows on the ceiling.

We'd been doing this—calls at night, photos and messages during the day—for just under two weeks when it happened. I'd just finished a half-day shoot for the publisher, an author who insisted his dog be in every frame. I was back at Ink & Ashes, downloading files, when my phone buzzed.

William: Are you busy wednesday?

My stomach flipped. I typed back too fast:

Me: Depends. Why?

A minute passed. Two. I imagined him frowning at the screen, regretting the question. Then:

William: I want to see the rest of the photos.

William: The ones you didn't send to the publisher.

William: Can you… bring your laptop?

William: If that's okay

I exhaled. Okay. Work. Photos. Safe. I smiled. Of course he'd think of it like that.

Me: Yeah, of course.

Three dots.

William: Okay.

William: Est?

Me: Yeah?

William: No work this time.

William: Just… you. Me. Photos. Coffee.

William: That's not… weird?

My heart skipped, then stumbled, then took off. No work. Just you. Me. Coffee. Curiosity didn't just have teeth now. It had a name: danger.

Me: Not weird.

Me: Sounds… nice.

William: Okay.

William: Then it's a plan.

I stared at the thread long after it went still. Then I did the stupidest thing I could have done.

I walked straight to the front of the studio, where Tui was rearranging inks, and said, "So William asked me to come over and he said 'no work, just you, me, coffee' and now I can't tell if this is a non-date or my first actual date in years."

Tui blinked twice, like he had to replay the sentence. "Wow." he said. "Come again, but slower this time."

I repeated it, each word making me feel more unhinged.

He set the ink down. "Okay. Basic question. Do you think it's a date?"

"I don't know," I said, too loudly. "But there's no work. He specifically said that. And coffee. And… he wants to see the photos that aren't for the publisher. That feels… intimate? But maybe he just wants control, he's like that, he needs to vet what's out there. but also…coffee can be date-like? And—"

"Est."

I shut up.

Tui folded his arms, watching me with that annoyingly perceptive look. "If you are spiraling this hard about whether or not it's a date, it is already a date—for you."

"I know that." I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. "That's the problem. For me it is. For him it might just be… a safe person in his controlled environment. A… non-threatening coffee consultant."

Tui's mouth twitched. "That's the least sexy phrase I've ever heard."

"I'm serious." I insisted. "If I treat it like a date and he doesn't, I'm going to feel like an idiot. And if I don't treat it like a date and he… somehow does, then I'm also an idiot."

“So you’ve trapped yourself in a perfect idiot’s paradox.” He nodded sagely. “Classic.”

“Very helpful, thank you.”

He leaned against the counter. “So maybe.” he said, “instead of fixating on the label, you focus on not being a jerk. Don’t push. Don’t flirt so hard he bolts. Don’t pretend you don’t care, because that would be weird too. Just… show up. As yourself. See what he can handle.”

“That sounds like a therapy line,” I muttered.

“It is.” he said. “I stole it. My therapist is very wise.”

I laughed, despite myself.

He sobered slightly. “Est… you’re right to be careful, Under all the jokes. If this goes weird, it’ll hurt. For both of you.” His eyes gentled.

“I know.” I said quietly.

He just clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Buy a new shirt.” he advised. “And for the love of all that is holy, charge your laptop. Nothing kills a maybe-date like Windows updates.”

I stood in front of William’s building, the familiar slick lobby gleaming under the soft afternoon light. My camera bag felt lighter this time.

My palms were sweating. I checked my phone for the ninth time.

William: Just come up. Door’s unlocked.

The city lights blurred outside William’s penthouse windows, a stark contrast to the quiet intimacy blooming within. The last slivers of twilight bled from the sky, leaving behind a deep indigo canvas dotted with nascent stars. He’d made us tea, a delicate jasmine blend, and the scent now mingled with the lingering turpentine from his studio. We sat on the plush, charcoal rug, the same one where he’d finally

found a moment of peace, our mugs warming our hands. A comfortable silence settled, a different kind of quiet than before, one woven with anticipation. We had been talking on the phone for days. I didn't want to be ridiculous and think of this as a date, but I longed for it, Learn more, see more about him.

“I still can’t believe you fell asleep.” I murmured, my voice soft. A smile played on my lips as I watched the faint blush creep up his neck.

He shifted, a slight shrug. “I don’t either.” His gaze met mine, a hesitant vulnerability in his winter eyes. “It’s never happened before. Not like that.” He gave me a slight smile.

“Good.” I said, a warmth spreading through me, unrelated to the tea. “It means you felt safe.”

He frowned, tracing the rim of his mug. “Safe?”

“Yeah. Safe enough to let go.” I leaned back on my hands, my eyes sweeping over the vast, minimalist space. “This place, it’s beautiful, William. But it’s also a fortress.” He didn’t argue. He just watched me, that intense gaze of his.

“You know.” I continued, a sudden surge of honesty bubbling up, “when I first saw you standing there against the window, a silhouette… I felt it.” My heart hammered a little, a frantic drum against my ribs. “That pull. That immediate, undeniable sense of…this.” I gestured vaguely between us. “Like a recognition. Like I’d been looking for you without even knowing it.” His eyes widened, just a fraction. He didn’t speak, but his breath hitched, a soft intake of air.

“It sounds crazy, I know.” I laughed, a nervous, self-deprecating sound. “Love at first sight and all that. But it wasn’t just physical, though you’re…you’re incredibly striking.” My gaze lingered on the sharp planes of his face, the dark hair falling just so. “It was something deeper. A feeling that beneath all the walls, there was someone…someone extraordinary. Someone who felt things as deeply as I do.”

He finally found his voice, a low rumble. “You’re… very direct.”

“Is that a bad thing?” I challenged, a playful glint in my eyes.

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “Just…unusual.” He took a slow sip of his tea. “I don’t… I haven’t felt anything like that. In a very long time.” His voice was almost a whisper now, raw with an honesty that matched my own. “I thought… I thought I was broken. Incapable of it.”

“You’re not broken, William.” I reached out, my fingers hovering just above his. “You’re just guarded. And that’s okay. We all have our armor.”

He looked at my hand, then back to my eyes. A tremor ran through him. “You think so?”

“I know so.” My fingers finally brushed his, a spark of warmth, a jolt. He didn’t pull away. His skin felt cool, but beneath it, a pulse thrummed. “Everyone deserves to feel seen. To feel loved.”

His thumb, almost imperceptibly, stroked the back of my hand. A shiver traced its way down my spine. “You…you’ve seen me. More than anyone else has, in years.”

“And I want to see more.” My voice was firm, resolute. “I want to know everything about you, William. The good, the bad, the ugly. The reasons for the walls. The dreams you keep locked away. All of it.”

He squeezed my hand gently, a silent acknowledgment. “That’s… a lot.”

“I’m not afraid of a lot.” I grinned, a genuine, wide smile. “Are you?”

A faint smile touched his lips, a rare, breathtaking sight. “I’m not sure. I haven’t had to be, in a long time.” He looked away, his gaze drifting towards the city lights. “It’s… overwhelming. This feeling.”

“It is.” I agreed, a soft sigh escaping me. “But it’s also exhilarating, isn’t it? To feel something again. To feel…alive.”

He turned back to me, his eyes searching mine. “Alive, yes. Terrifyingly so.”

“Good.” I squeezed his hand back. “Let’s be terrifyingly alive together.”

A soft chime echoed through the apartment. William flinched, his hand tensing in mine. The spell, fragile and new, splintered. Our bubble bursting.

“Who…?” he began, his brow furrowing. The chime rang again, more insistent.

“You expecting someone?” I asked, a sudden jolt of unease.

“No.” He pulled his hand away, rising fluidly to his feet. His posture, which had softened so much, now stiffened. The walls were back, not quite as high, but present. “I don’t… I don’t usually have visitors.”

He moved towards the door, a sleek, almost invisible panel in the wall. He pressed a button, and a small screen flickered to life, showing a grainy black-and-white image of a young man with a bright, eager smile, holding a vibrant bouquet of flowers. My stomach churned. Flowers.

“Lego?” William’s voice held a note of surprise, but also a strange, quiet comfort.

A muffled, cheerful voice filtered through the intercom. “William! Open up! I brought the usual!”

William sighed, a sound that was half exasperation, half affection. He glanced at me, a flicker of apology in his eyes. “My friend.”

“I gathered.” I tried to keep my voice light, but a sharp, unexpected pang of jealousy twisted in my gut. His friend. Bringing him flowers.

He pressed another button, and the door hissed open, revealing a whirlwind of color and energy. Lego was indeed short, thin, with a cloud of long, dark, unruly hair, and eyes that sparkled with an almost childlike enthusiasm. He wore a baby tee shirt and ripped jeans, a stark contrast to William’s muted palette. The bouquet he held was a riot of sunflowers, purple irises, and scarlet poppies.

“William!” Lego’s voice was high, melodic, full of genuine joy. He practically bounced inside, Jumping on William like a puppy hugging his neck filling the vast space with his effervescence. He didn’t seem to notice me at first, his attention entirely on William. “You won’t believe the day I had! This new client, she wanted—” He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes finally landing on me. His smile faltered, replaced by a wide-eyed curiosity. “Oh! You have… company!” His eyes sparkling.

William, looking thoroughly uncomfortable, embarrassed cleared his throat. “Lego, this is Est. Est, this is Lego.”

Lego’s eyes, large and expressive, widened even further. He assessed me from head to toe, a quick, intense once-over that somehow managed to be both innocent and unnervingly perceptive. “Est! The photographer! The one P'Tui told me about!” He beamed, extending a flower-laden hand. “It’s so nice to finally meet you! P'Tui said you were amazing. And you got William to… well, you got him to do things!” He winked conspiratorially at William, who visibly stiffened.

My hand, still warm from William’s touch, met Lego’s. His grip was surprisingly firm, his fingers cool from the flowers. “Tui? You know Tui?”

“Oh, yeah! Tui’s the best!” Lego chirped. “He’s my friend from the flower shop! actually. Says I have a knack for brightening people’s days. Especially William’s!” He winked at William again, who now looked like he wanted the floor to swallow him whole. “Tui said you were seeking a job!”

My smile felt a little strained. So, Tui, was Lego’s friend. And Lego brought William flowers every Wednesday. Every Wednesday since William stopped leaving the house. The thought, unspoken, hung heavy in the air. This wasn’t just a friend. This was a long history.

“Lego, the flowers.” William’s voice was tight, a clear attempt to redirect.

“Oh, right!” Lego’s attention snapped back to the bouquet. He held it out to William, a silent offering. “These are for you. Sunflowers for brightness, irises for hope, and poppies for… well, just because they’re pretty and remind me of your painting.” He handed them over, his fingers brushing William’s. A casual intimacy that made my teeth clench. He was charming and kind, and I couldn't find a reasonable reason to hate him.

William took the bouquet, his movements stiff. “Thank you, Lego.” He placed them on a nearby table, almost reverently.

Lego, oblivious to the subtle tension, turned back to me. “So, you’re the one who got William to actually smile in a photo! P'Tui showed me the proofs! They were incredible! He actually looked happy.”

“He was… a good subject.” I managed, the words feeling brittle.

“He is!” Lego agreed wholeheartedly. “He’s the best! The most talented artist I know. And he’s so sweet, once you get past all the growling.” He giggled, a light, airy sound that grated on my nerves.

William shot Lego a warning look. “Lego.”

“What? It’s true!” Lego pouted playfully. “He’s just shy. And he’s been through a lot. But he’s getting better now, right, William? You’re starting to… let people in!” His eyes flickered between us, a knowing glint in their depths.

My heart sank a little. Let people in. Lego had already been in. Deeply. For a long time.

“Lego, I think Est and I were in the middle of something.” William’s voice was strained, a clear attempt to dismiss his friend.

“Oh! Right!” Lego clapped his hands together, then frowned. “But… I just got here! And I wanted to tell you about the new painting I saw at the gallery! It was just like your blue period, but with more… sparkle!” He looked at me again, his smile returning full force. “Are you staying for a movie, P'Est? William has the best taste in old films!”

“Lego, we can talk about this later.” William’s jaw was tight.

“But I haven’t seen you all week!” Lego’s lower lip jutted out. “And you didn’t answer my texts about the new art supplies. I found that special pigment you were looking for! The one that only comes from that tiny shop downtown!” My jealousy, a sharp, unwelcome guest, flared. This wasn’t just a friend dropping by. This was a weekly ritual. A deep, ingrained connection. He sourced art supplies for William. He knew William’s blue period. He knew William.

“I’m sorry, Lego.” William stepped forward, placing a hand on Lego’s shoulder, a

gesture that was both comforting and subtly dismissive. “I’m… busy right now. Can we reschedule?” Lego’s bright eyes dimmed a little. He looked from William’s hand on his shoulder to my face, then back to William. A flicker of understanding, perhaps hurt, crossed his features.

“Oh. Okay. I get it.” He offered a small, forced smile. “Well, it was really nice to meet you, P'Est. I hope you two have fun.” He backed towards the door, his previous effervescence replaced by a subdued quiet. “I’ll just… leave these here.” He gestured to the flowers. “See you next Wednesday, William?”

William nodded, his expression unreadable. “Next Wednesday.”

Lego gave a quick wave, then slipped out the door, leaving behind a faint scent of fresh-cut flowers and a heavy, awkward silence. Guilt rose up. He looked young, probably even younger than William, and I was a fool to feel jealous of someone I barely knew.

William closes the door, leans his forehead against it for a second, then turns back to me. his shoulders slumping. “I’m sorry. He’s… he means well.”

“He seems very sweet.” I said, my voice flat. I hated the tone, hated the feeling churning inside me.

“He is.” William walked over to the flowers, picking up a single sunflower. He turned it over in his fingers, his gaze distant. “He’s been… a constant. Since I was a kid.”

“I gathered.” I pushed myself to my feet, walking towards the panoramic window, my back to him. The city lights seemed to mock me, so bright, so indifferent. “He brings you flowers every Wednesday. He knows your ‘blue period.’ He finds your special pigment.” I turned, my arms crossed, my expression tight. “He seems to know you very well, William.” It was what I wanted to see, to learn more, to see each of his faces. Each of them only for me.

William flinched, his eyes darkening. “Est, it’s not what you think.”

“And what do you think I think?” I challenged, my voice sharper than I intended. The jealousy, ugly and unwelcome, was twisting itself into a knot in my stomach.

“I…I don’t know. That…he’s more than a friend?” William’s voice was hesitant, his gaze avoiding mine.

“Is he?” The question hung in the air.

William finally met my eyes, his own filled with a mix of frustration and hurt. “No. He’s not. He’s my friend. My childhood friend. He’s like a little brother to me. He’s always been there. Especially after… after my mother died. He was the only one who kept coming. Even when I pushed everyone away.” He gestured to the flowers. “He just… he doesn’t give up. He thinks flowers can fix anything.” A faint, almost

sad smile touched his lips. “And sometimes, they do.” The explanation, delivered with such raw honesty, pricked my conscience. My jealousy, which had felt so justified a moment ago, now felt petty, small.

“I’m sorry.” I said, my voice softer now. “I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.” I walked towards him, reaching out to touch his arm. “It’s just… you’re so important to me already, William. And the thought of someone else… someone who already has such a deep history with you… it made me feel…” I searched for the word. “Insecure.”

He looked at me, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. He covered my hand with his own. “Insecure? Why?”

“Because I want to be that person for you.” My voice was barely a whisper now, vulnerable. “I want to be the one who knows your blue period. The one who brings you joy. The one you let in.”

His thumb stroked my hand again, a comforting gesture. “You are, Est. You are already. You broke through more walls in one afternoon than anyone has in years.” His gaze was intense, unwavering. “Lego… he’s family. But you… you’re something new. Something I didn’t think I’d ever find.”

A fragile hope bloomed in my chest, pushing back the shadows of jealousy. “Good. Because I really, really want to find it with you.”

He pulled me closer, his eyes still locked on mine. “So, a movie?” His voice was low, husky.

I nodded, a soft smile spreading across my face. “A movie.”

He led me to a large, comfortable sofa, its plush cushions inviting. He put on an old black-and-white film, a classic I vaguely recognized but couldn’t name. The dialogue, crisp and elegant, filled the air, a gentle backdrop to the quiet intimacy that began to re-settle between us. We sat close, our shoulders brushing, the warmth of his presence a comfort. My hand found his again, our fingers intertwining, a silent promise.

After a while, the film’s narrative faded into the background. My gaze drifted around the apartment, taking in the art, the clean lines, the subtle textures. My eyes landed on a closed door, slightly ajar, revealing a glimpse of canvas and brushes.

“Is that your studio?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, a slight hesitation. “Yeah.”

“Can I see it?” My curiosity, always strong, now burned with renewed intensity. I wanted to see the space where he poured out his soul, where he created the powerful art I’d photographed.

He looked at me, a hint of nervousness in his eyes. “It’s… a mess. And it’s not really for visitors.”

“I’m not just a visitor, William.” I squeezed his hand. “I’m Est. And I want to see you. All of you.”

He looked at me for a long moment, then a slow, almost imperceptible nod. “Okay.”

He rose, pulling me gently to my feet. He led me to the door, pushing it open fully.

The studio was a world unto itself. Canvases of all sizes leaned against walls, stacked in corners, some pristine white, others splattered with vibrant hues. The air, thick with the scent of oil paint and turpentine, was alive with creative energy. Tubes of paint lay scattered on a large wooden table, alongside brushes soaking in jars, and palettes smeared with a rainbow of colors. A massive easel stood at the center, holding a half-finished piece, a swirling abstract of blues and greens.

“Wow.” I breathed, stepping inside. The room, unlike the rest of the apartment, was chaotic, vibrant, a true reflection of a restless, creative mind. “It’s… incredible.”

He stood beside me, watching my reaction, a subtle pride in his stance. “It’s where I… disappear.”

“I can see that.” I walked slowly around the room, my eyes devouring every detail. I stopped in front of a series of smaller canvases, all depicting the same subject: a young man. A young man with a cloud of dark, unruly hair, bright, expressive eyes, and an impish smile. Lego.

A cold knot formed in my stomach. There he was again. My eyes scanned the different paintings: Lego laughing, Lego with a thoughtful expression, Lego holding a single flower, Lego with his arms flung wide in a gesture of joy. Dozens of them. Each one captured with an intimacy, an understanding, that made my heart ache.

“These are… beautiful.” I said, my voice flat, a leaden weight in my chest.

William came to stand beside me, his gaze on the paintings. “He’s a good model. So much life in him.”

“He certainly is.” The words tasted like ash. My earlier jealousy, momentarily

appeased, now surged back with a vengeance, sharper, more defined. It wasn't just that he knew William. It was that he inspired him. He was William’s muse.

William seemed to sense my shift in mood. He glanced at me, a question in his eyes. “Est?”

I forced a smile, a brittle mask. “They’re… very striking. You’ve really captured his… essence.”

He nodded, still looking at the paintings. “He always brings me inspiration. He’s so full of light, even when I’m in the darkest places.” The words, innocent in their intent, twisted the knife deeper. He was William’s light. I was just… the photographer. The new, uncertain flicker.

I swallowed, trying to dislodge the lump in my throat. “You’ve painted him a lot.”

“Since we were kids.” William confirmed, a soft nostalgia in his voice. “He used to try to stay still for hours., just so I could practice. He’s probably in half my early sketchbooks.”

Half his early sketchbooks. The sheer volume of their shared history, their shared intimacy, was overwhelming. My guilt, a hot flush, washed over me. How could I be jealous of this? Of a childhood friend who brought light and inspiration to a man who had suffered so much? It was monstrous. But the feeling, ugly as it was, persisted.

“So, you’ve been painting your whole life?” I asked, trying to steer the conversation away from the subject of his muse.

“Pretty much.” He shrugged. “My mother… she encouraged it. She was an artist herself, in her own way.”

“Oh?” I turned to him, genuinely curious now. This was a new thread, a new facet of him.

“Yeah.” He walked over to a small, cluttered desk, picking up a framed photo. He handed it to me. It showed a vibrant woman with kind eyes and a warm smile, standing in front of a bustling café. “This was her. And her first café.”

The woman in the picture radiated warmth, a stark contrast to William’s current intensity. “She owned a café?”

“She owned several.” William said, a faint smile touching his lips, a genuine, fond memory. “And a huge flower shop. The one Lego works for, actually. She built them from the ground up. She had a real knack for making things grow. Businesses. Flowers. People.” His voice softened, tinged with a familiar sorrow. “She was… incredible.”

“So, you own them now?” I asked, a sudden realization dawning. The penthouse,

the art, the quiet wealth. It all clicked.

He nodded, his gaze distant. “Yeah. After she died. My father… he didn’t want them. Said they were too much work. Too much sentimentality. So, I took them over. I have people who run them, of course. I just oversee things. It’s part of keeping her memory alive.”

My admiration for him deepened. He wasn’t just a reclusive artist. He was a son, carrying on his mother’s legacy, even from behind his self-imposed walls. And Lego, his childhood friend, worked for his mother’s flower shop. The layers of their connection, so intertwined, so deeply rooted, made my earlier jealousy feel even more foolish. Lego was just trying to bring William closer to his mother, or what was remaining of her.

“That’s… amazing, William.” I said, genuinely impressed. “To keep that going. To honor her.”

He looked at me, a flicker of surprise in his eyes, as if he expected judgment. “It’s just… what she would have wanted, What people expected.”

“It’s more than that.” I countered, my voice firm. “It’s a testament to who she was, and to who you are. You could have sold them. You could have walked away. But you didn’t.” I put the photo back on the desk, then turned to face him, my heart aching with a renewed tenderness. “You’re so much more than you let people see, William.” He didn’t respond, but his gaze, intense and searching, held mine. The air crackled between us, filled with unspoken emotions.

“Can I… show you something else?” He asked, his voice low, almost a plea. I nodded, my breath catching in my throat.

He led me to a large, covered canvas in a corner, much larger than the others portraits. He reached for the cloth, pulling it back with a flourish.

It was a portrait. Of me.

Not the polished, professional shots I’d taken. But a raw, intimate sketch, charcoal on canvas, capturing the moment I’d looked at him, truly seen him, through the lens of my camera. My eyes, wide and intense, dominated the piece, reflecting a fierce determination, a quiet empathy. My hair, a wild cascade, framed a face that was both strong and vulnerable. It was me, stripped bare, seen through his eyes.

My breath hitched. “William…”

“I started it right after you left that day.” he confessed, his voice rough. “I couldn’t

stop thinking about… about what you said. About seeing me. About my story.” He reached out, his fingers hovering inches from the canvas. “You saw me. And I… I wanted to see you too. Truly see you.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. The jealousy, the insecurity, the guilt—all of it dissolved, replaced by an overwhelming wave of emotion. He had seen me. He had captured me. Just as I had captured him.

“It’s… it’s incredible.” I whispered, my voice thick with unshed tears. “It’s me. It’s really me.”

He turned to me, his eyes now mirroring the vulnerability in mine. “Est.” He reached out, his hand gently cupping my cheek. His touch was warm, electric. “I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

My heart hammered, a frantic drum against my ribs. “You don’t have to be.”

He leaned in, slowly, his gaze fixed on my lips. My eyes fluttered closed, a silent invitation. His breath, warm and sweet, ghosted across my face. Then, his lips met mine. It was soft, hesitant, a tentative exploration. Not a fiery, passionate kiss, but a gentle, almost clumsy first touch. It tasted of jasmine tea and something uniquely William—a quiet strength, a hidden tenderness. His lips were soft, a little chapped, but the sensation sent a shiver through me, a profound sense of rightness. I leaned into it, my hands finding his waist, pulling him closer. He responded, his arm wrapping around my back, pulling me flush against him. The kiss deepened, a slow, deliberate unfolding of emotions, a silent conversation of longing and hope. When he finally pulled back, just inches, his forehead rested against mine. His eyes, dark and heavy-lidded, searched mine.

“Wow.” he whispered, his voice rough with emotion.

“Yeah.” I breathed, my own voice shaky. My lips tingled, a warm, lingering sensation.

He pulled back further, but kept his arm around my waist, his thumb gently stroking my hip. “I… I really want to see you again, Est.”

“I want that too, William.” I leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. “Very, very soon.”

He smiled, a genuine, breathtaking smile that reached his eyes, chasing away the shadows. “Good.” He squeezed my waist. “So, another date?”

“Definitely another date.” I grinned, my heart soaring. The city outside, once a symbol of his isolation, now seemed to hum with a new, vibrant promise. This wasn’t just a photoshoot. This wasn’t just a date. This was the beginning of something real. Something deep. Something that felt, for the first time in a very

long time, like home.

It might not matter what we call this.

Not-date. Date. Whatever.